

Testing Deviant! Are You One Also?

By Wade Rand

**What sound do students usually utter when the teacher mentions test?
What visible facial expressions do students normally depict when the teacher mentions test?**

Testing deviance must begin with the adoption of new views on the significance of testing. Current testing around the world is presumably a measure of student knowledge or learning over a given period of time. This measure, which differs from time to time for reasons unknown to the student, is converted into a mark or score, and ultimately the numerous marks collected by students are the judge of whether or not they learned enough. Hence, tests are dreaded.

If you and your students verbally and visibly dread tests, becoming a testing deviant might help you and your students overcome all the unnecessary testing anxiety.

If we view language as a means of communicating (which I believe is the only possible view one can have of language), then we should be concerned with teaching students to use language for communication. Communication can occur only through the use of language skills (*reading, writing, speaking, and listening*). To use skills, students also need to learn the language subskills—grammar, vocabulary, spelling—the elements necessary for communication to occur. If the classroom has involved practicing language skills, then it follows logically that the test should also have students demonstrate their improved abilities in the language skills coupled with the new language information (subskills) studied.

The question has now become—how to conduct tests that involve the demonstration of language skills. Language Testing Deviance attempts to measure students' communicative fluency in the target language and indirectly the students' accuracy with the language subskills. It prescribes to the following rules:

Rule 1: Create a Positive Attitude Towards Testing

Positive attitudes towards testing translate into better test results—what both teachers and students desire. Currently, students dread tests because they view them as unfair, irrelevant to the course material studied, difficult, stressful, and the one supreme evaluation on which their academic lives hinges. Developing tests that are success-oriented and relevant to the course material studied prior to the test is the first step necessary in creating a more positive attitude towards testing. With such “positive” tests, classroom motivation can be increased throughout the course, which in turn will lead to improved student performance.

Rule 2: Assist Students in Mastering the Course Requirements (skills and subskills)

In language teaching the goal is to teach in a manner which helps students to master the language skills and subskills rather than simply attempting to measure learning.

Rule 3: Evaluate the Teacher's Teaching Effectiveness

If students are unsuccessful on a test or section of a test, evaluate, don't blame. Evaluate where and why the teaching was unsuccessful. Why did the student or students not master the intended skills and subskills? And afterwards ask, "What can I do as the teacher to reteach or assist the student to master language skills and subskills?" Normally, students' poor performance is the outcome of both test participants—teacher and student. Through evaluation, teachers detect what to reteach and where to provide more student practice, while students ascertain where more effort and practice should be applied.

Following the maxim that testing can test only what was taught and how the "what" was taught, tests I normally construct are centered around a story, with all the test tasks connected to the story. Students are initially required to listen to my reading of a fragment of the story or read the fragment themselves. In either case, students take notes about the fragment to use in completing the other test tasks. The story fragment is not necessarily the beginning of the story. Other parts or additions to the story fragment involve students' completing tasks connected to the story or creating additions to the story using their own imaginations, their own lives, and all the language skills and subskills. Furthermore, the student becomes a main character in the story fragment, allowing for the student's life to be included in the content of the story, thus giving the test content relevant to the students. These ideas and concepts are best illustrated in the following test example. This test example was used in the Kyrgyz Republic in a teacher re-training program (See Figure 1 below).

Of course, other language testing tasks could have been included instead of the ones I have chosen. Other tasks could include the following: a. making a telephone call between Mrs. Ryan and the student, b. the student assisting Mrs. Ryan with daily tasksdirections, c. buying a plane or bus ticket, or d. the teacher acting as Mrs. Ryan (or any story character) with the student and the teacher posing as story characters while having a conversation over a topic arising from a situation in the story.

Initially, the prevailing belief may be that this type of test would be too time-consuming and too difficult for the teacher to mark. It would be if the teacher marked the test, but this type of test involves Test Marking Deviance. Marking deviantly entails the teacher not marking the test. If the teacher attempted to mark the test, it would be an incredibly difficult, time-consuming, and unproductive task. With this type of test, the best marking method is to allow students to mark their own test, which brings the discussion back to rule 2. Finding and correcting their own mistakes is the best method for mastering the material. Students are much more likely to learn from finding and correcting their own mistakes than from the teacher doing the mistake finding for them. To get an idea of what the common mistakes are, the teacher might consider reading

through the test before the students go about marking and correcting them. In this way a judgment can be made as to what to reteach and where to provide more practice (rule 3). In marking and correcting the test, students should be allowed to use any reference materials necessary, including other students and the teacher. Naturally, the teacher would not provide the answers or corrections, but only give students hints as to where the problem may be. Converting the markings and corrections to an actual mark can also be delegated to the students, who are asked to give themselves a mark based on their performance. Performance here should not only be judged on the amount of correct material versus the amount of mistakes, but on the amount of effort made in the initial test writing and in the test marking and correction process. Normally, students will mark themselves lower than the teacher would (We are our own worst critics). Allowing students to decide upon the grade gives students input into their academic life, and low marks become the students' doing, not the teachers'. Of course, the teacher reserves the right to lower or raise marks but should do so only in consultation with the student.

Another aspect of Language Testing Deviance involves not announcing tests. First of all, students should be evaluated on daily performance, not on only one instance which is usually a test. As per rule 3, tests should evaluate teaching as much as learning. Therefore, they should be unannounced to allow for more accurate teaching evaluations. Tests that students go home and study for do not accurately measure effective teaching, as students can and do memorize information for tests that they soon forget after the testing event. Effective teaching can be measured only on how well the teacher has helped students develop skills and assisted them in transferring the language subskills to long-term memory. If on a spontaneous test, students cannot recall language subskills, then the subskill information studied has not been learned. Information not transferred to long-term memory indicates that the teaching has been ineffective. Transferring language subskills to long-term memory requires using the language subskills in language skill practice and recycling previously learned language. Spontaneous testing measures language skill progression and the effectiveness of the transfer of information and retention of language information in long-term memory. For spontaneous testing to accurately measure teaching, the classroom process needs to be constructed in a manner that students do not detect when they are being tested. Tests are just a natural flow in the teaching and learning process without markers distinguishing them from other classroom routines. Figure 2 below summarizes some of the advantages of this approach.

If tests are not the main element used to give students marks, how do teachers give marks in a Language Testing Deviant classroom? Every day should be a "testing" situation in that teachers and students alike evaluate learning and are given marks not according to how well the skills are used or how much language information is retained, but to how much effort is displayed by the student in learning the language. Keeping in mind that skills develop at varying rates in each student, teachers should not expect all students to progress at the same rate. The student who is the most verbal or has the best listening or reading comprehension should not be given the highest mark. What is more important is effort. If the best student is not progressing, or demonstrating an effort to improve language abilities, s/he should not receive the highest mark. A poor student may be making considerable effort but not be able to achieve or use language in the same manner as the best performing student, so it is not fair to give this student a lower mark if s/he is making a maximum effort.

Testing deviance assists the teacher in creating a more positive classroom atmosphere in general, and evaluates the teacher's teaching more than the student's learning. Tests are an unnoticed part of the classroom teaching and learning process, where students are aided in mastering the language skills and subskills. Dread disappears in such a classroom as student effort becomes more important than being the best, and academic lives no longer revolve around testing events. Rather, they revolve around the everyday classroom where students are required to give themselves marks—they have control and responsibility for their academic lives.

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Figure 1

Test Beginning-Central Story Fragment
Listening: Short Story
Tests: Listening Comprehension
Students: Listen or Read and Take Notes (teacher decides mode to communicate material to students)
Teacher: Reads or Provides Texts for Students
Example: One morning quite early, you are walking through the park thinking about your upcoming English exam. After a short while, you notice a very old woman sitting on a bench with a newborn baby. Examining the woman and baby from a distance, you are able to determine that the woman must be a foreigner. "Who is she?" "Why is she with such a tiny baby?" and "What is she doing here?" are the questions that came to your mind. You instinctively feel (because you are a journalist) that this woman must have an interesting story, so you decide to meet her. Being bold, you walk over to her and introduce yourself in English. The old woman is happy you speak English and promptly introduces herself as Mrs. Ryan. She tells you that the baby is her great-granddaughter, the daughter of her grandson, who is not traveling with her. Your conversation with Mrs. Ryan continues.....
Read and Correct the Letter
Write a Letter
Complete the Calendar
Conversation with Police
Cloze Exercise: Complete the Article
Write a Newspaper Article
Write the Dialogue
Supply the Missing Story Fragment
Questions

Read and Correct the Letter

Example Reading

Tests: Reading and Language Use

Example: Mrs. Ryan shows you the following letter which she has written to her grandson. She also tells you that she is not a good writer in English and asks you to correct the letter for her.

My dear Sun,

How are you. We are fine here. Unfortunately, the weather is quite hoe and I must stay home during the day with your beautiful baby. But I do mind because she is a good baby are we are enjoy being together. she is healthy.

Last week, we made a small trip to the mountain up close to the city. It was a lovely day indeed and it was nicer to remain get out of the city and to breath fresh air. The city is dirty air like most cities.

When will we meet again? I doesn't want to remain very long for her, but I do realize I must stay since you tell me safe to return. Any idea of when that May be? I mist you. Do be careful son. Don't let something happen to you, please. Luckily, I have a new friend, I meeted her in the park one evening. She studies English now and it is not difficult for we to communicate. I think she is a journalist.

Please right soon!

Much Love,

Write a Letter

Tests: Writing, Language Use

Example: Write a letter to a good friend telling this friend of your meeting with Mrs. Ryan and other happenings in your life recently. (*a letter to a friend uses informal language*)

Complete the Calendar

Tests: Grammar, Writing

Example: Since you gave Mrs. Ryan your telephone number, she has called you several times. She is on the phone now and inviting you go to a concert with her. Mrs. Ryan suggests that you go on Tuesday evening- 7:00 PM or Friday afternoon-3:00 PM. Create a calendar for yourself, determine if you can go and when. Complete the calendar with your weekly schedule. Include the following two events: Tuesday-6:00PM dinner with your parents and Wednesday-3:00 go to concert (the same concert Mrs. Ryan is inviting you to go to) with your friend, Anna. (Note: This task is quite easy.)

Conversation with Police

Tests: Speaking and Listening

Example: You were observed in the park speaking to Mrs. Ryan by a police detective. During your English

exam later that day, the police detective comes to your class to investigate your connection with Mrs. Ryan and the international crime ring. He politely asks the teacher's permission to talk to you and to allow you to leave the classroom. Your teacher allows you to leave and accompany the police detective to the police station.

(The teacher poses as the police detective and interviews the students about their involvement with Mrs. Ryan, asking them to recount how they met her and to disclose the content of their conversation with her in the park . each interview with the students can be different as each will have to imagine the conversation they had with Mrs. Ryan).

Cloze Exercise: Complete the Article

Tests: Reading

Example: You notice the following article in the English language newspaper. Unfortunately, because of the poor printing facilities in your country, some of the words are unreadable, Read the article and fill in the English words that were unreadable.

International Crime Suspect Caught---Links to Bishkek

LONDON: Last night the police in central_____ caught a most wanted criminal, Peter Ryan, known as “killer” to the Mafia. At the time of the _____, he was attempting to board a _____ at Victoria Station for Paris. For some days the police had been keeping the station under surveillance because intelligence reports indicated Mr. Ryan may be in London. Mr. Ryan attempted to _____ from the police but was captured _____ the station. Upon investigation of Mr. Ryan's suitcase, the police discovered several different passports and a large sum of _____. Police suspect he was going to deliver the money to some other crime figures in Paris.

Mr. Ryan was also carrying a _____ from Bishkek, Kyrgystan. The letter suggests Mr. Ryan has links to _____ Asia. His wife's whereabouts are not known, but the _____ are continuing the search for her. She is wanted in connection with a bank robbery in Moscow last year where 2 million The _____ of the letter has not been determined.

Write a Newspaper Article

Tests: Writing

Example: You decide to write an article about Mrs. Ryan for the newspaper that you work for. Write the article(Students should recognize that newspaper writhing is different than writing a letter or other types of writing).

Write the Dialogue

Tests: Writing, Language Use

(Students should recognize from the story that the woman

is old and a stranger and therefore should use more formal English).
Example: Write the conversation you had in dialogue form with the old woman in the park.
Supply the Missing Story Fragment
Test: Listening Comprehension/Speaking
Example: (Students listen to the following story fragment)
Several weeks ago Mrs. Ryan was in London. Her grandson's wife had just given birth to a baby girl. Because of some unforeseen circumstances, Mrs. Ryan and the baby's mother had to leave London quickly.
(Students supply the missing information, Why did they leave? What happened to make them leave so quickly. Where did they go? Students are given some time to think and tell the story fragment)
NOTE: This task is an example of a task that students complete that involves a story fragment which occurred before the initial story fragment.
Questions
Tests: Comprehension, Inference(Listening or Reading)
Example:
1. The baby cannot walk? (inference)
2. The baby is her granddaughter? (comprehension)
3. In this story, you are a journalist? (comprehension)
4. Mrs. Ryan has a child of her own? (inference)
5. This test is difficult? (humor/opinion)
6. Mrs. Ryan is American (interference, there is not enough information in the story, so students should answer "don't know")

Figure 2

Language Deviant Testing
Positives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to construct • Tests skills and subskills • Relevant to student's life • Useful for all language levels • Creates positive attitude (#1) • Assists in mastering material (#2) • Effective teaching evaluation tool (#3)

- Prevents cheating*

Negatives

- Complicated marking scheme
- Not school administration friendly

* Such tests help prevent or lessen cheating in two ways. Students use their lives as a basis for some content of the test. Each student has different experiences than the other students; therefore, the content of the test will be different. The second way cheating is prevented is that students work on different tasks at the same time. The test tasks are written on cards, and each student takes a card and works on a different task. Therefore they cannot copy from other students around them, which means teachers do not need to produce different versions of a test as is so often done.